Spring 2021

Treatise, Scripture, Manifesto: Reckoning With "Love Cake"

Lalini Shanela Ranaraja
Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Treatise, Scripture, Manifesto: Reckoning with *Love Cake*

By Lalini Shanela Ranaraja

My first experience with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, the author of the poetry collection *Love Cake,* was when I read her essay "What It Feels Like When It Finally Comes: Surviving Incest in Real Life" in Jessica Valenti's non-fiction collection, "Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and A World Without Rape." I had ordered it off the internet during my gap year between high school and college, when I was actively seeking out books that would articulate things I couldn't say yet. I used to leave the book face-up on the dining room table, embellished in yellow with the word that no one had ever said aloud to me. In our family any flat surface was always strewn with books, but this was a book that no one wanted to sweep onto the sideboard during cleanup. Night after night, my parents would glance at it and glance away, even though they paid for the credit card I'd used to buy it.

Most of the essays in the book went over my head then. They were written by feminists, educators, sex workers, activists, transpeople. At first, Piepzna-Samarasinha's work went over my head too. On her website, she describes herself as "a queer disabled nonbinary femme writer, educator and disability/transformative justice worker". At 19, I had never spent extended time with the majority of these adjectives or met anyone who could lay claim to them. Piepzna-Samarasinha's descriptions were foreign to me - suffering from chronic fibromyalgia, struggling to survive in the wastelands of America, and experimenting with her sexuality in the feminist 1980s landscape. But two things linked us. She was of Sri Lankan descent - and she was a survivor. It didn't matter that her abuse experience and mine had very different perpetrators – mine was a houseboy, hers was a parent – and that she was of Sri Lankan Tamil/Irish Burgher descent, raised in America, to my Sri Lankan Sinhalese, raised on ancestral Lankan land. That double link, however tenuous, was enough.

There is a section at the end of Piepzna-Samarasinha's essay in *Yes Means Yes* that I copied down by hand years ago:

"Oakland charms me like it charms so many. It's the luckiest I've ever felt, the most grown. When I climb the hill in my neighborhood to the post office that's fringed with blooming wild sage, giant agave cactus, and scraggly palm trees, rocking a mini skirt and giant platforms in February, I still can't believe that I'm grown, adult, and living here. It's not like incest stops living or speaking in my body, it's that shit really did change. I learned how to talk to and calm myself down, how to fuck and love the way I've always wanted to. Not everything's a disaster and when it is I know what to do with it. I could almost blend, almost blink, almost forget the whole underbelly world I know.

But if I forget thee, oh Survivor World, I am as complicit as all the everyday pod people walking around sipping their Starbucks, eating, sleeping, working and consuming. For survivors who get to this space, happiness is such a novelty, of course you want to just stay in it for a while. And of course movements built on only rage risk burnout. But there's got to be something else we make together - a movement of radical survivors of seual violence that is all of the above: us loving, fucking, healing, praying, listening to one another. Not too much. Not either permanently damaged, or fixed and never wanting to talk about it again. Not just women in programs, people trying to do self care and forget it, but people remembering and knowing survivor world but also fully alive and healing and able to use our new energy for the fight." (Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha, "What It Feels Like When It Finally Comes: Surviving Incest in Real Life" in *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and A World Without Rape*, Seal Press, 2008).

So much of that passage was unfamiliar to me, then. But I couldn't let the words go. I could picture climbing that hill so clearly - picture myself beside her, climbing into a place where it was all okay. Where it wasn't crazy to believe you could change yourself, and change the world, and not have to do it alone.

***

My second encounter with Piepzna-Samarasinha was in the spring of my sophomore year of college. I'd borrowed *Love Cake* from the library for the first time, one among an assortment of books on things I thought I'd been in counseling long enough to confront, but instead of staying in and reading I went to a party and drank more than I should have. There were a lot of boys I didn't know at that party, and it triggered me right into one of my episodes. My best friend saw me stumbling out into the cobblestoned night, herded me away from the hooting, bars-bound crowd, and helped me home. He stood outside my dorm room door while I stripped off the makeup and the leather pants, then made me tea in the microwave. He'd walked me home before, but that was the night I told him why being allowed to walk me home was a privilege.

A few days later, blasted out and raw, I put on a leather jacket like it was a suit of armour and took myself to a coffee shop. Got a table at the window, read Piepzna-Samarasinha and Fatimah Ashghar and Roxane Gay, and wrote for pages. Two years on, I can barely read my own handwriting, but the poems I wrote that spring are some of the most real I've ever produced. Two of them - *Proof Positive* and *Fair Exchange, No Robbery* - won me tangible things and took me places I couldn't have imagined when I was writing through furious tears in that coffee shop, when I was writing as a last resort, writing as a way to claw myself out of the place that Samarasinha called *survivor world.* But when the semester began again, I took the books back to

the library. Said no when the girl at the circulation desk asked if I'd like an extension period. Knew, finally, the limits of what I could confront at the time.

When I was reading *Love Cake* back then, I went into it blind and it stripped me bare. I was pulled deep into survivor world and my own survivorhood. Having been careful since then not to let myself get so triggered, having stepped up my counseling and learned words like "intentionality" and "mindfulness" and "toxicity" and wielded them in my own life, having shifted into the manic-depression rather than the manic-panic spectrum of my headspace, it is difficult to look back to that time. And reading *Love Cake* feels different, now that I've made it to my final months of college, now that the red fog of survivor world has passed. It is certainly an easier read than *Dirty River,* the memoir of Piepzna-Samarasinha's that I have read. *Love Cake's* themes are brutal, yes, but there is a lot of white space in which to process them; many of the poems focus on creating an image, a fleeting feeling, before she moves on to other thoughts and dreams. It was one of her first publications; she was giving her readers an inkling of the revelations to come.

The book's 44 poems are divided unevenly between 5 sections: *serendib, the kunju suite, what is left, coda: Sri Lanka 2009,* and *remyth. Serendib* was one of the names given to ancient Sri Lanka, and the eponymous section contains poems that explore Piepzna-Samarasinha's diasporic experiences as a multi-ethnic individual. They trace the author's reckoning with the Sri Lankan civil war raging thousands of miles away, with being part of the minority ethnicity involved in that war, with her lost mothertongue, and with the immigrant experiences in 1980s Toronto. *The kunju suite* contains the explosive messiness of physical relationships, and *what is left* delves even further into these connections and disconnections - with the poet's parents, each abusive in different ways, with lovers, with friends and femmes, and with herself. *Coda: Sri Lanka 2009* contains only three poems, confronting the contradictions of a three-decade conflict with no clearly defined sides. *remyth* contains four poems, each of them triumphant and healing in different ways.

I saw echoes of myself in many of these poems, certainly more than I saw in any other book I'd come across at that time. It was the first book I'd read where Sri Lanka was in the *titles of poems* - more than one, at that. All the things I was confronting for the first time - memories of the war that ended when I was 11, how it all came back when the Easter bombs went off in 2019, the death of relatives I cared about while I was on the other side of the world, the gaping time difference that meant I always heard about my family's life after it had happened, the longing for insane, impossible food, the chameleon I became every time I chose an outfit for America, the knowledge that with every passing week my country became more foreign to me, even as the foreign place I was in did not become any less foreign - all this and more was echoed in this slim volume of poems, which became treatise and scripture and manifesto to me.

Today, however, what becomes clear to me are the differences. Even after four years, Piepzna-Samarasinha still resembles no one I know in my real life. Minority Tamil to my majority Sinhala, when I do not have a single fully Tamil friend, when it is the one language I gave up learning. Blended, American-raised by a white mother, where I am Kandyan, a term that means nothing outside of Sri Lanka but whose insider recognition I don't know if I should relinquish yet. Hardscrabble, self-sufficient, anti-establishment, where I come from privilege, have scrimped and saved in America but cannot conceive of the privation and scrambling which she endured. Chronically ill by 23, the same age I am now, when I am the healthiest I've ever been. Queer and open about it, celebratory of sexuality, where I everything I learned about it I learned the hard way.

In a way, she is one of the most open authors I have ever read, and that gave me the illusion of knowing her, of sharing something with her. But what does that even mean, when abuse and country are the only half-truths I can truly claim to tie me to her work? Why are these connections so important for me to defend? Why do I have the sinking suspicion that if we ever met in person, I would have no idea what to say to her - and why am I terrified that she would take one look at me and say I represented so much of what she was still fighting against? Why, when I have read countless other authors only for their work, lived and breathed their words but never been concerned with their race or nationality or background, never even thought to find out, can I not separate poet and person? Why does it hurt so much to realize that the person I admire, whose work gave me a foothold in the storm, who is in some undeniable way a part of my success - because I can see, now, the places where her work bled into mine - is someone with whom I shouldn't pretend to claim kinship?

I have no answers to these questions. I don't even know if they are the right questions to ask. But just like I knew, two years ago, that I had to stop reading this book because I wasn't ready yet to start healing from all that it would unleash in me, I don't think I'm ready to answer these questions. Just like any kind of healing, there is no timeline for that confrontation.

What I do have is the book's titular poem, and what it still means to me, despite everything I've realized:

twelve ways of looking at love cake - Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

it's heavy as shit
a brown caramel brick
twelve eggs cashews pumpkin preserves and
nobody I mean nobody
knows how it got its name

gramma used to send it every New England winter
aluminum-wrapped triple-sealed
squatting weird on the sideboard of the dining room we never
went into
weird like all the things from backhome

grandmas grind cashews
find a foreign or familiar sugar
cream as much richness as can
drizzle honey and rose. all we had
and what came to us:

Portugese. Arab. Malay. our own
we make it into one dense-ass cake
fat on hips that will travel
packages mailed cross oceans and acres of desire

now I
make my own version
with the nuts I can eat
jaggery chopped off
from the Jamaican grocery
loving this love
this could be mailed across the world
thick'n built to last
brown preserved by sweet:
watch as I open wide
take a breath
and bite deep.

I don't remember the last time I ate love cake, but I've held a piece in my hand every December that I can remember. I don't know what goes into it, but Piepzna-Samarasinha's description fits, because no two recipes are the same, each one guarded by a phalanx of grandmothers begrudgingly passing down oily, handwritten sheets to daughters who can never quite get it right in their eyes.

To me, the appeal of love cake has always been aesthetic. In our family and others we knew, rectangles of cake, about the size of a piece of brownie sliced lengthwise, are packed first into wrapping paper, then into dark cellophane in all the colours of stained glass, and topped off with a ribbon. They resemble nothing so much as dozens of tiny gift-wrapped wine bottles,

packed onto the Christmas trays beside various other foods that are sent from house to house at festival time.

When I flew back to college after each Christmas breaks, there was always a struggle to fit the love cake in among the rest of the foods I couldn't abandon - moist tamarind fruit, cassava chips, bright packets of Munchee biscuits. These foods were hidden from roommates and consumed only on bad days, but the love cakes were sent forth, elegant and glossy enough to bestow on friends, along with postcards of elephants and tiny wooden trishaws. One year, my best friend summoned the courage to give a few cakes back to me, admitting that he could barely make it through the richness of one little parcel. My grandmother would have slippered him, but I understood. After all, I didn't eat the cakes. What was important to me wasn't the taste, but the scent of oil and heat and spices I couldn't name, wafting out into the sterile dorm room every time I opened a drawer.

This past Christmas, my mother mailed me love cake. I hadn't seen my family in nearly a year and the "oceans and acres of desire" had never felt wider. On the 11th of December, a DHL package on the frigid front stoop. Munchee biscuits and tamarind fruit, Jaffna fish paste and wooden elephants - and a dozen love cakes. None of the women in my family had time to make them that month, but a family friend was taking orders for sweetmeats. She'd wrapped the cakes in actual gift wrap, ruddy Santas gambolling in the snow; it was better than the stained-glass colours.

I bought a three-foot tall plastic Christmas tree and a 24-pack of baubles, arranged the love cakes on a red plate underneath it. Lankan Christmas sprang to life in my rented Midwestern house. As friends dropped by, beckoned by the festooned tree and the fairy lights, the love cakes disappeared from the plate one by one; I thought I should try a piece, but never got around to it, and then one day, in the clear light of a January snowfall, I saw they were gone.

END